focus on women

UNITED NATIONS

Violence against Women

"Imagine a world in which three to four million people are suddenly struck by a serious, recurring illness. There is chronic pain, trauma and injury. Authorities fail to draw any connection between individual bouts with the disease and the greater public threat. Many suffer in silence."

The world that Joseph R. Biden, former chairman of the US Senate Judiciary Committee, describes here is his own country, the United States of America, and the "disease" is domestic violence. The vast majority of victims are women. In the US, one woman is physically abused every eight seconds and one is raped every six minutes. Spouse abuse is more common in the US than automobile accidents, mugging and cancer deaths combined, notes a 1992 US Senate Judiciary Committee report.

Yet the seriousness or scope of the problem is often ignored. "If the leading newspapers were to announce tomorrow a new disease that, over the past year, had afflicted from 3 to 4 million citizens, few would fail to appreciate the seriousness of the illness. Yet, when it comes to the 3 to 4 million women who are victimized by violence each year, the alarms ring softly", said Senator Biden.

A global phenomenon

Everywhere and in all ages, women have been victims of violence. They are and often have been raped, mutilated, battered and murdered.

In most societies, gender-based violence has long been tolerated, letting the perpetrators go unpunished, their crime tacitly condoned. Based on the popular view that a wife is the property of her husband and that therefore he may do with her whatever he thinks fit, legal systems in some countries have recognized a husband's right to chastise or even kill his wife if she is considered disobedient or is thought to have committed adultery. A parliamentarian in Papua New Guinea, taking part in a debate on wife battering, went as far as to say, "Wife beating is an accepted custom. We are wasting our time debating this issue."

Such violence is often covered by a veil of secrecy and denial. Very rarely are gender-based abuses reported or recorded. In the US, according to a study published in *American Psychologist*, only 2 per cent of intrafamilial child sexual abuse, 6 per cent of extrafamilial sexual abuse and 5 to 8 per cent of adult sexual assault cases are reported to the police. However, with increased awareness it is now possible to

see how widespread and multi-faceted the situation is. This is evident from various recent studies, including a 1994 World Bank discussion paper on violence against women.

- Studies from a variety of countries show that one quarter to more than half of women report having been physically abused by a present or former partner. Far more are subjected to ongoing emotional and psychological abuse.
- Sexual abuse is not only common but widespread in most countries. In Canada, a 1993 study based on 420 randomly selected women found that more than 54 per cent of them had experienced some form of unwanted or intrusive sexual experience before reaching the age of 16; 51 per cent reported being victims of rape or attempted

rape. In 25 per cent of the cases, women who were physically assaulted reported that their partners explicitly threatened to kill them.

• Rape during war is still common. According to a European Union fact-finding team, 20,000 women were raped in Bosnia in the first months of the war. Similarly, women have been raped in recent years in civil strifes in Cambodia, Liberia, Peru, Somalia and Uganda.

• Girl children and adolescents continue to be abused in many countries. In Barbados, one woman in three and one to two men in 100 report being sexually abused during childhood or adolescence. In Peru, a study found 90 per cent of the young mothers aged 12 to 16 in a hospital to be rape victims, often as a result of assault by a father, stepfather or other close relative. In Costa Rica, 95 per cent of pregnant clients under 15 at a hospital were found to be incest victims.

• Dowry-related abuse is common in some countries. In India, where "bride burning" is a known practice, official police records show 4,835 women were killed in 1990 due to the failure of their families to meet demands for money and goods. In greater Bombay, one of every five deaths among women aged 15 to 44 was reported to be a case of "accidental burns".

• Female infanticide and selective abortion of female foetuses has increased in several Asian countries. Female infants are often killed within a few days of birth. In a South Asian country, one study over a two-and-a-half-year period found that 58 per cent of known female infanticide was committed by feeding babies the poisonous sap of a plant or by choking them by lodging rice hulls soaked in milk in their throats.

• Genital mutilation, a traditional practice affecting women's health, is practised in parts of Africa and Asia, and among immigrants in the US and Europe. Globally, at least 2 million girls a year experience genital mutilation, approximately 6,000 new cases every day—five girls every minute.

• Women are at greater risk of violence and resulting injury in their homes and from men they know. At a police station in São Paulo, Brazil, 70 per cent of all reported cases of violence against women took place in the

DEFINING VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

In December 1993, the United Nations General Assembly adopted a landmark resolution on gender violence called the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women. It defined violence as "any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threat of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivations of liberty, whether occuring in public or private life".

The Declaration also lists abuses that fall into the category of violence against women:

1. Physical, sexual, and psychological violence occuring in the family and in the community, including battering, sexual abuse of female children, dowry-related violence, marital rape, female genital mutilation and other traditional practices harmful to women;
2. Non-spousal violence;
3. Violence related to exploitation;
4. Sexual harassment and intimidation at work, in educational institutions and elsewhere;
5. Trafficking in women;
6. Forced prostitution; and
7. Violence perpetrated or condoned by the State.

Though very broad-based and comprehensive, this definition, according to some women's rights advocates and analysts, includes only acts perpetrated by an individual or the State and excludes laws, policies or structural inequalities that could be considered as violent. Lori Heise, a Director at the Pacific Insitute for Women's Health, in Washington D.C., writing in association with Jacqueline Pitanguy and Adrienne Germain, said in a World Bank study that the UN definition provides insufficient guidance to determine whether items that are not listed, such as female feticide or restrictive abortion policies, would constitute gender violence. Any definition of violence, said Ms. Heise, must have at its centre the core concepts of force and coercion, which distinguish between violent and merely oppressive behaviour.

Ms. Heise and her associates have come up with their own definition of violence against women: Any act of verbal or physical force, coercion, or life-threatening deprivation, directed at an individual women or girl, that causes physical or psychological harm, humiliation or arbitrary deprivation of liberty and that perpetuates female subordination.

home. In Santiago, Chile, almost three quarters of all assault-related injuries to women were found to be caused by family members. In Canada, 62 per cent of women murdered in 1987 died at the hands of their spouses.

Most gender-based violence against women is inextricably linked to male power, privilege and control.

• Violence during pregnancy is identified as a major reason for miscarriage and low-birth-weight children. In Mexico City, a survey of 342 randomly sampled women found that 20 per cent of those battered reported blows to the stomach. In Costa Rica, 49 per cent of a group of 80 battered women reported having been beaten during pregnancy; 7.5 per cent of them reported miscarriages.

Why women are at risk

"A wife married is like a pony bought. I will ride her and whip her as I like."

This proverb, no matter how old, is still relevant. Whether it is beating a wife at the end of a bad day or preying on an unsuspecting evening jogger at a city park, most gender-based violence against women is inextricably linked to male power, privilege and control. Culture and tradition, which often are reflected in national laws, only help to perpetuate the idea of male dominance.

Excessive use of alcohol and drugs has been identified as a factor behind gender abuse. Economic and social factors, such as unemployment, economic stress, overcrowding and unfavourable and frustrating work conditions, also lead to gender-based violence. Some researchers have also argued that violence is actually a learned behaviour. Today's violent husbands are yesterday's children of violent parents, they say. In fact, as one study in the US found, men who saw their parents attack each other, compared to those from non-violent families of origin, were three times more likely to hit their wives and ten times more likely to attack them with a weapon.

Men accused of violence against their wives sometimes try to shift the blame, claiming that their actions were provoked by the behaviour of their partners. Upon close examination researchers discovered that such behaviour was often linked to some form of failure or refusal on the part of the women to comply with or support their husbands' wishes and authority. As a study in the *British Journal of Crime* noted, to a violent husband/partner, almost anything seemed to be provocative: "being too talkative or too quiet, too sexual or not sexual enough, too frugal or too extravagant, too often pregnant or not frequently enough".

In some countries, drunkenness is accepted by the judiciary as a defence in assaults against women. In September 1994, the Supreme Court in Canada overturned the conviction of a man who, having consumed a large amount of alcohol, pulled a 65-year-old woman out of a wheelchair and sexually assaulted her.

A more universal reason behind gender-based violence, many people think, is the structural inequality between men and women in the family as well as in society. Studies from both developed and developing countries show violence against women to be a by-product of the societal structure in which men make all decisions and women are expected to obey.

Whether within the family or outside it, women's lower status manifests itself in an overall acceptance of abusive or violent conduct towards women as "normal". As a United Nations study on domestic violence concludes, violence against women is a function of the belief, fostered in all cultures, that men are superior and that the women they live with are their possessions or chattels, which they may treat as they wish and as they consider appropriate.

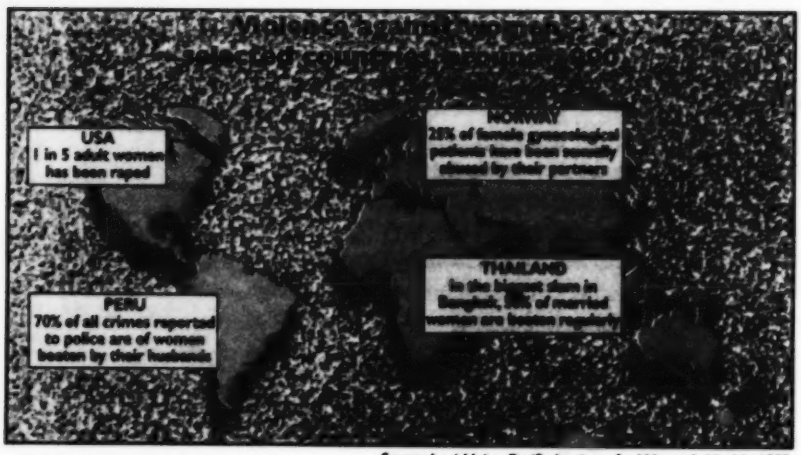
• Commenting on her husband, the wife of a Nobel Peace Prize winner once said, "He is a good husband; he only hits me once a week."

The health consequences

"My ex-husband shot me through the head as I slept and left me for dead. I managed to walk downstairs, where my daughter was calling for help. My husband proceeded to stab me with such force that the knife-tip broke off in my intestines. He robbed me

of my eyesight, my sense of taste and smell. He robbed me of my family and my stepchildren."

This unidentified woman, who gave testimony to a Canadian panel on violence against women, is just one of the numerous victims of gender-based violence who have to live with scars on their bodies and fear in their minds. According to a report of the Global Commission on Women's Health, in addition to morbidity and mortality, violence against women leads to psychological trauma, depression, substance abuse, injuries, sexually transmitted diseases and HIV infection, suicide and murder. This places an enormous financial burden on the national health-care system.


USA
1 in 5 adult women has been raped
NORWAY
28% of female gynecological patients have been sexually abused by their partners
THAILAND
PERU
70% of all crimes reported to police are of women beaten by their husbands

Source: Lori Heise, Pacific Institute for Women's Health, 1992

The World Bank, in its *1993 World Development Report*, for the first time assessed the health consequences of gender-based violence. Based on the limited data available, it estimated that in industrialized countries rape and domestic violence take away almost one in every five healthy years of life of women aged 15 to 44. On a per capita basis, the health burden of domestic violence is about the same for reproductive-age women in both developed and developing countries.

However, since malnutrition and poverty-related diseases are widespread in developing countries, the overall health burden there is greater. As a result, the percentage of health burden attributable to gender-based violence victimization is smaller, about 5 per cent. But in some developing countries where maternal mortality and poverty-related diseases have been brought under relative control, the healthy years of life lost to rape and domestic violence appear as a larger percentage—16 per cent of the total burden.

An obstacle to development

Women's participation in the development process—especially in such areas as family planning, environmental protection and education—is crucial. Yet when women are faced with violence, their ability to participate fully in these and other aspects of development is hampered. In many countries, husbands resist women's work outside the home, since they fear this may lead to women's empowerment. Men often use force or threats in order to divert or extort women's income.

The Women's Development Programme in Rajasthan, India, was sponsored by the Government, but its success was due largely to the energy and drive of its leader, a young woman. One of the goals of the Programme was to reduce child marriage. The campaign, though popular among women and certain segments of society, angered many people, including some village elders. One day the programme leader's home was raided by a group of men. She was gang-raped by them in front of her husband. As she lay unconscious, the leader of the gang told her horror-stricken husband, "Keep your wife in line or we will rape her again." This virtually ended a successful programme aimed at improving the lives of girls and women.

A society may eventually quantify its economic loss due to gender-based violence, but how can it ever calculate the loss it suffers due to the fact that women are not safe and that their freedom is restricted?

Combating violence: Move for a global agenda

Though violence against women is as old as human civilization, it became a matter of international concern only after the 1985 Third World Conference on Women, in Nairobi. The UN-sponsored Conference was notable for the

adoption of the Strategies for the Advancement of Women to the Year 2000. This document, which provided a framework for action at the national, regional and international levels, identified violence against women as a major obstacle to the achievement of the three objectives of the UN Women's Decade 1976-1985: equality, development and peace. It called for legal measures to prevent gender-based violence and to set up national machineries to deal with the question.

"Violence against women derives essentially from the lower status accorded to women in the family and in society."

In June 1993, the World Conference on Human Rights, in Vienna, Austria, stressed the importance of working towards the elimination of violence against women in public and private life. One outcome of the Conference was the appointment of a Special UN Rapporteur on violence against women. The Rapporteur, who will look into causes and consequences of violence against women and recommend means and ways to eliminate them, will report to the UN Commission on Human Rights on an annual basis.

In December 1993, the General Assembly adopted the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women. This Declaration defines for the first time what constitutes an act of violence against women and calls on Governments and the international community to take specific measures to prevent such acts.

In September 1995, at the Fourth World Conference on Women, the world will have an opportunity to review and appraise the advancement of women since the UN held its first conference on women two decades ago. The Conference is expected to adopt a Platform for Action that will spell out actions Governments and communities can take to make the Nairobi Forward-looking Strategies a reality. Violence against Women is one of the ten critical areas of concern identified in the Draft.

A Platform for Action

"Violence against women derives essentially from the lower status accorded to women in the family and in society. It is abetted by ignorance, lack of laws to prohibit violence, inadequate efforts by public authorities to enforce existing laws, and absence of educational and other means to address its causes", says the Draft Platform for Action. Experience in a number of countries shows that women and men can be mobilized to fight against violence in all its forms and that effective public measures can be taken to address both the consequences and the causes of violence.

The Draft Platform proposes specific measures Governments and communities can take to eliminate violence against women.

These include:

1. Recognize violence against women as a violation of women's human rights;

2. Cooperate with the Special UN Rapporteur on Violence against Women;

3. Study and widely publicize root causes and mechanisms of different forms of violence against women;

4. Analyze and review existing laws relevant to violence against women and develop new legislative efforts, in accordance with the Declaration on Violence against Women;

5. Address both the causes and the consequences of violence against women, using both legal and social measures. Emphasize preventing violence as well as protecting women subject to violence;

6. Launch legal literacy programmes and information campaigns on existing laws and women's human rights;

7. Include in the curricula material on gender inequality and violence;

8. Train the judiciary and the police to ensure fair treatment of women targets of violence, increase recruitment of women into the police forces and ensure higher representation of women in the judiciary;

9. Set up high-level national bodies to oversee the working of safeguards for women;

10. Take specific action to protect women and girls who are subjects of sex trafficking and forced prostitution;

11. Take special measures to protect women with disabilities and female migrant workers.

Taking away the excuse

Any act of violence is actually the use of coercive forms of power. It is used to compel someone to do something he or she is unwilling to do. Violence against women is

clearly a way to ensure their subordination to men. An essential step in combating violence against women is to take away any excuse. No coercive use of power can be considered legitimate under any circumstances.

To stop violence against women, each society needs to look at itself and to challenge those values and beliefs that reinforce male violence. Experts taking part in an October 1993 meeting on violence against women organized by the UN's Division for the Advancement of Women felt that each type of violence required its own remedy. Some solutions might come through the legal system and the police function of the State. Others might require the use of public institutions, like the educational system, to influence values and attitudes. Still others might require opinion leadership by community leaders and the mass media. Acceptance of responsibility publicly to shame persons who violate the norm of no violence can also be an effective measure.

As the experts concluded, "rather than the punishment fitting the crime, it is more a matter of the prevention fitting the cause".

"THAT WAS A WAY OF LIFE, AND IT WAS NOT RIGHT"

American football is different from soccer, which is better known as football in most part of the world. But when it comes to the emotions that they evoke, there is no difference between the two.

Troy Vincent is a cornerback for the Miami Dolphins football team. He is rich and famous now, but as a child he had to watch helplessly as his mother was abused. "To see my mother get beat was the way of life in my home. It was part of the community to beat your wife. When you would leave home and go to school, you would hear some of the guys say, 'Man, I smacked my girlfriend three times last night.' Then one of his friends gave him a high five. That was a way of life, and it was not right."

Mr. Vincent admitted seeing his mother in the morning with a cast on her arm, but did not know how he could help her. "It is very disturbing to see a woman be a prisoner in her own home", he said. Mr. Vincent was joined by several other famous athletes who took part in a panel discussion on domestic violence in Florida in October 1994. All of them had similar stories to tell.

Stephen Braggs, also a star player for the Dolphins, admitted that he often mentally abused his wife because he was a perfectionist. "I would practice mental abuse, like, 'Why are you always fat? You have never been anything. Why are you always doing this wrong?'"

Irving Fryer, another football star, admitted that he had abused his wife. It was now a matter of the past, he said, but this was something he continued to deal with emotionally. "We are all products of our environment. Some of the things that happened in my home, I had to practice to get away from. And it just didn't happen overnight", he said.

There is a simple conclusion to be drawn from all this: no one is born violent, but if children grow up amidst violence, they may end up being violent themselves. If violence against women is to be resisted, it must start where it begins, in the family.

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